

## The Shape of Saying: Some Modern Critical Ideas about Poetry, and their Application

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For anyone interested in how a poem comes to be written, what a poem is, and the nature and validity of readers' responses to it, ours has to be one of the most exciting and challenging of ages in the whole history of literary thought. That sounds like a large claim to make, but a look at any publishers' literature list will confirm it. Recent books about poetry range from simple handbooks on critical terms, suitable for school or undergraduate college students, to encyclopedias of poetics for more advanced students and their teachers; from insights into their individual contributions to the genre offered by practising poets, to highly philosophical debates about poetry engaged in more stridently by a new breed of literary philosophers; from new biographies, psycho-literary analyses and historical 'placings' of individual poets, to more exclusively critical assessments of their work; and from extremely close interpretations of isolated poems to ambitious re-adjustments of the entire map of English and American verse.

Much of the stimulus for this intense critical activity has come from the inter-action of the American, English and (in recent years particularly) European literary worlds, and this has had the effect of making the critical scene extraordinarily complex as well as exciting. Not surprisingly, there has been a backlash, in the form of the desire to restate older, simpler values which have a reassuring ring of common sense about them, and, what is perhaps more important, allow for the element of pleasure which has been claimed for poetry from Horace onwards. A lot of this backlash has come from England. The first of Dame Helen Gardner's controversial Norton Lectures, given at Harvard in 1979, took a sweeping and sceptical look at the New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstructionism, and concluded that the microscopically analytical approach to the text which they entail (and the consequent re-ordering of our expectations from poetry) tends to dehumanize both the poet and the reader.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of her lectures has come, again from an established English academic, Laurence Lerner of Sussex University, a collection of essays entitled *Reconstructing Literature* (1983). Although Lerner sits carefully on the fence when it comes to the question of whether or not his book is intended as a counter-attack on Structuralism and Deconstructionism,<sup>2</sup> the title he has chosen makes his feeling clear enough, and the essays he has brought together are united in their authors' refusal "to abandon [their] belief in reason, in the possibility of meaning, in the [traditional] conception of literature and in the need for value judgements."<sup>3</sup>

However, neither Gardner nor Lerner denies that in the large body of recent criticism there have been useful illuminations of individual poems. Considering the vastness of the modern critical industry, it would be strange indeed if this were not so. Perhaps for this very reason, neither of them has felt any need, in the discussions referred to above, to give instances of such illuminations—beyond some references by both of them to Robert Penn War-

ren's interpretation of *The Ancient Mariner* as "a model of close critical interpretation"<sup>4</sup> (Gardner), and as containing "rich insights" (Lerner).

What I would like to do in this paper is to bring down to earth the often very theoretical discussions about modern critical approaches to poetry: that is, to remove them from the abstract plane on which criticism has tended to become "its own self-regarding philosophical activity"<sup>6</sup> and apply some of these approaches to particular poems of my own choice.

While it sometimes seems that there is a large gap between the theorists and the explicators, there are of course critics (not only the New Critics, like Warren) who have really tried to put their methodology to the test, and I have found some precedents for this kind of endeavour. For instance, in her study, *Poetic Artifice* (1978), Veronica Forrest-Thomson has discussed Empson's interpretation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 94, and then given several structural 'anatomies' of the 'internal relations' of the poem in order to demonstrate that Empson arrived at a good reading "by the wrong roads."<sup>7</sup> Another critic, Norman Holland, has given a traditional explication of Frost's "Mending Wall" followed by a psychoanalytical dissection of the poem as a projection of infantile oral fantasy.<sup>8</sup> In both cases we are invited to see the benefits that accrue from the use of sharper critical tools. However, I am concerned with the general trends of recent criticism rather than with championing any one trend in particular. My aim is simply to show what kind of results these new approaches can produce, and so to suggest how they can (or cannot) help us as readers of poetry.

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In attempting this, I must keep in mind the dangers of distortion and dilution which come with what Wayne Booth calls "lumpthink."<sup>9</sup> For the critics associated with the various movements are themselves surprisingly various, and very often the differences between them are even more striking than the similarities. More than that, the same critic can sometimes be seen to change his stance between one book and the next, to contradict himself, or to fail to put his own ideas into practice when faced with an actual text (see Frank Lentricchia's account of Harold Bloom's "vacillations"<sup>10</sup> for instance). Presumably it is for such reasons that even the handbooks of literary terms avoid pat definitions of each critical movement. Therefore I will first pick out and briefly discuss what seem to me to be the most important tenets of some of the most celebrated recent critics.

1. "Poetry is a kind of 'saying.'"<sup>11</sup> There can be few students or teachers of literature who are not familiar with the opening sentence of Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. It sounds simple enough, but it is also very significant. The emphasis on the *words* in a poem, as against considerations of larger determinants such as its historical context, its place in the poet's oeuvre, the demands of the genre and so on, is the corner-stone of the New Criticism. Hence the New Critics' emphasis on short poems in which individual words carry rich and subtle meanings, the inter-play between the words producing tensions which result in ambiguity and paradox. Although this kind of criticism is considered rather old hat by those who have come into the critical arena more recently (it is sometimes referred to as 'the old New Criticism'), there is no question but that it is here to stay. Only the extent to which it is assimilated into and even subordinated to broader considerations of the text varies according to the critic and the type of critical work he is engaged in.

2. "... genuine certainty in interpretation is impossible."<sup>12</sup> E. D. Hirsch's arguments take to their logical conclusion the ideas in Wimsatt and Beardsley's article "The Intentional Fallacy" published in 1946. By reminding us forcefully that we cannot be sure, after all our probings, of arriving at the meaning which the poet intended to convey, they put the emphasis on the objective existence of the text and the subjective response of the reader to it. Recent critics have not simply repeated T. S. Eliot's ideas about the impersonality of the work of art, but have turned more and more to the role of the reader's response. By 1954, Wimsatt and Beardsley felt bound to write another essay on the 'affective fallacy,' in which they warned against attending only to the psychological impact of the poem on the reader; but it was too late. Not only Hirsch, but also other scholars like Stanley Fish, refused to be deterred by such a warning. In fact, Fish, in the preface to his provocative book on *Paradise Lost*, proudly claims to be "embracing and going beyond it [the 'affective fallacy']."<sup>13</sup> And as we shall see in a moment, new ways of schematizing the content of the poem objectively (showing the inter-play of images, semantic associations and so on) are felt by some critics to give the reader perfectly legitimate grounds for carrying or 'importing' his own meanings into the text. In the past, critics have tried to avoid 'reading too much into' the text, so inevitably this has proved to be one of the most controversial developments of contemporary criticism.

3. "... by starting from a concern with the various tactics and deployments involved in ritualistic acts of membership, purification, and opposition, we can most accurately discover 'what is going on' in poetry."<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Burke has resisted being 'labelled,' but is perhaps most correctly referred to as a Rhetorician (the title of one of his works is *A Rhetoric of Motives*); but esoteric statements such as this one, which suggests that a poem is a strategic arrangement of symbolic elements, in which points of entry and conflicts can be distinguished, bring him close to Structuralism. This movement provides, or seeks to provide, the necessary substitute for the old-fashioned search for the author's meaning, a set of rules within which the new type of analytical critic can operate. In order to establish or 'construct' a given poem's significance, the Structuralist traces the development of patternings and antitheses in a text which can be systematized into codes and then 'recovered,' 'naturalised' (Forrest-Thomson's word) or decodified. This sounds like an elaborate way of talking about interpretation, but it is not, for the patterns which can be picked out, the coherence which they give the poem, and the significances which can be assigned to them, go far beyond the extrapolation of a poem's supposedly inherent, single meaning. Working within the framework of Structuralism, the reader becomes "not the passive consumer of an intelligibility he need only recognize but the active producer of meaning and participant in the exploration of possible modes of order."<sup>15</sup> Structuralism offers an attractive invitation to the reader, then. However, for this very reason, and in spite of their quasi-scientific, computer-derived jargon, Structuralist critics have been accused of undermining not only the importance of the poet but also the tangibility and authority of the text itself.

4. "... the structural principles of literature are ... closely related to mythology and comparative religion."<sup>16</sup> Northrop Frye's seminal essays in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) suggest to us the cultural or ideological sources of the rituals, oppositions and codes which contemporary critics find in poetry. An increased awareness of archetypes as a kind of "general

storehouse"<sup>17</sup> on which poets draw has led to new recognitions of universality in poetry, and new ways of discussing it. The relatively new disciplines of psychology and anthropology have both lent a helping hand here. Less usefully, perhaps, the feeling that it is possible to lay bare the very depths of a poem has also led to the dubious procedures of the Deconstructionist—that complicated kind of literary critic who may have a political axe to grind, and who takes a poem apart bit by bit, undoing the poetic process, in order to uncover the underlying system of beliefs from which it sprang. In the end, seeking out basic recurrent motifs in poetry tends to decrease still more the amount of importance attached both to the poet's creativity and the text, for each becomes merely a vehicle for the expression of certain subconsciously held, shared assumptions. Even before the publication of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, T. S. Eliot had written, "The attempt to explain the poem by tracing it back to its origins will distract attention from the poem . . . ."<sup>18</sup> And on to what? The poet's own life is considered to be ultimately irrelevant to the text itself, while as for the mythological substructures, as Lévi-Strauss has said, "Myths are anonymous . . . . When the myth is repeated, the individual listeners are receiving a message that, strictly speaking, is coming from nowhere . . . ."<sup>19</sup> Frye acknowledged a 'center' for literature outside literature itself, in the very depths of general human experience; Lévi-Strauss, a major Structuralist figure whose ideas about myths in some ways follow on from Frye's, denied but seemed to yearn for some such 'center'; Jacques Derrida, whose work is associated with both Poststructuralism and Deconstructionism, felt that there was no 'center' at all, only the force of the Western tradition of rational thought—which must be questioned. Considering the far-reaching and perhaps finally negative implications of his exploratory work, Frye was obviously right to claim that the 'plain sense' critical axioms of Arnold could "assuredly not survive the age of Freud and Jung and Frazer and Cassier."<sup>20</sup>

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### Longfellow's "The Cross of Snow"

The first poem I have chosen to discuss with reference to these ideas is Longfellow's "The Cross of Snow." Inevitably, my choice of poems is somewhat arbitrary, but this is part of my intention. The scholars quoted above have all made large, general statements, and have implied that they are applicable to *any* kind of poetry. I have selected this particular poem because, while it presents no special difficulties of interpretation for the traditionally-minded reader, it is also open to close verbal and structural analysis, and offers some opportunity for more complex and allusive readings.

#### THE CROSS OF SNOW

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,  
 A gentle face—the face of one long dead—  
 Looks at me from the wall, where round its head  
 The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.  
 5 Here in this room she died; and soul more white  
 Never through martyrdom of fire was led  
 To its repose; nor can in books be read  
 The legend of a life more benedight.

There is a mountain in the distant West  
 10        That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines  
              Displays a cross of snow upon its side.  
 Such is the cross I wear upon my breast  
              These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes  
              And seasons, changeless since the day she died.

### A traditional explication

The poem is one of the quieter, sadder, and, one might add, wiser works of Longfellow's old age. It was written about three years before his death, and if we accept T. S. Eliot's dictum that the only "legitimate" form of critical activity is simply "putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed,"<sup>21</sup> we would only need to convey two more pieces of information about it. One is that Longfellow's beloved second wife predeceased him by many years because she received fatal burns in a household fire, and the other is that Longfellow later came across a picture in a travel book of a certain mountain, which bears traces of snow on it even during the warmest months, in the shape of a cross. This curious phenomenon would seem to have given the poem both its title and its main inspiration, for Longfellow clearly saw it as a symbol of his own unchanging grief for his wife throughout the remainder of his life.

A traditionally-minded (sometimes termed 'Normal') critic, intent on "putting the reader in possession of facts" might also like to say something about the form of the poem, for it is a sonnet on the original Italian lines, and as such it develops in two phases or movements (the analogy with music is appropriate) which are marked by two distinct rhyme schemes—*abba abba* in the octave, and *cde cde* in the sestet. As often happens, the change in the rhyme scheme coincides with a change in the poet's point of view and mood, so that there is a noticeable break at the end of 1.8, when the poet turns from a consideration of his wife's death to his own grief about it. It might also be pointed out that there is a shift of imagery and its accompanying thought at this stage too, when various words suggesting the purity of his wife ("halo," "soul more white," "martyrdom," "legend" [as in 'legends of the saints'] and "benedight" [meaning 'blessed']) give way to the single symbol of the cross which suggests his own suffering and selfless devotion, and the deep spiritual meaning of his response to her death. In the Italian sonnet, the octave was often used to suggest the problem, and the sestet to present its solution: the two parts performed a question and answer function. Here, the pain of both the wife's death and the husband's bereavement is tempered by the glow of their souls' beatification. In particular, the man who lay awake through the long night of 1.1 becomes the noble and serene exemplum of a love which rises above "the changing scenes" of everyday human life at the end.

This is the sort of explication regularly given in classrooms and found in books shaped by the humanist tradition of lit. crit. And many readers would still suppose that that is "all/Ye know ... and all ye need to know" about Longfellow's poem to enjoy it—that is, to feel moved by it—and to learn from it—that is, to understand that what seems like senselessly and randomly inflicted pain can in fact be seen as having a divine purpose.

### Modern objections

However, such an unashamed use of biographical background, and the recourse to old ideas about form, would be anathema to many modern critics, who would find the explication based on them both superficial and inadequate. John Wain's collection of twelve closely analytical *Interpretations* (1955) is introduced by his curt dismissal of the idea that "It is necessary to set a poem, first, in its place among other poems by the same poet, and second, in its continuum of history and biography." In fact, he adds, "I regard such an attitude as a fundamental, as *the* fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of literature; and I have no more breath to spare for it."<sup>22</sup> And there is no entry for the sonnet in the index of Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Forms*, or indeed for any of the other types of poems which we usually consider to be literary forms. What matters to Burke is something called the "equational structure"<sup>23</sup> which is unique to each individual poem.

What is more, to end up any discussion of a poem with a statement such as mine about the meaning contained or proposed in it, would be to invite scorn. As some of my earlier remarks will already have indicated, movements like Structuralism and Deconstructionism have increased the modern critics' "resistance to viewing poetry as a mode of propositional statement."<sup>24</sup>

### Closer analysis

A more up-to-date critical approach would, of course, be to dissect the poem word by word, image by image, connotation by connotation, line by line, in order to reveal the semantic correspondences and tensions which in turn would reveal, or at any rate be capable of sustaining, various possibilities of meaning.

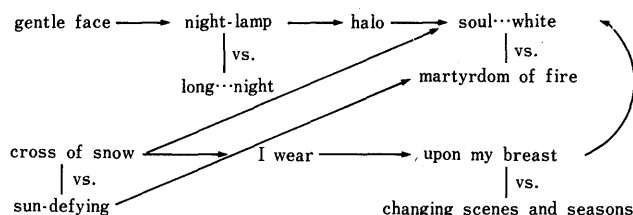
Such an approach would undoubtedly put us on our mettle. For instance, we would be alert to the explicit link between the light of the "night-lamp" which staves off the long night's darkness, and the appearance of a "halo" around the visionary woman's head. This halo, which demonstrates the saintliness of the woman, can also be seen to have served as a kind of beacon to Longfellow in his long, eighteen years' darkness. The very words "pale light" of 1.4, being associated both by sensory connotation and rhyme with "white" at the end of the next line, reinforce not only the idea of the woman's purity, but also the suggestion of spiritual illumination in a dark context. Then there is an interesting and effective leap (across the redness of the fire in 1.6) into 1.11. For here too there is white—the snow-white of the cross which gleams both on the mountain-side and in the poet's heart. It is via this route that the suggestion of purity + illumination is carried across from the dead woman to the sorrowing man.

In conflict with whiteness and light are the references to fire and sun, similarly related by sensory connotations (of heat and colour) and similarly pervasive of the whole poem. In 1.6, the wife is remembered to have died through fire which nevertheless could not destroy her spirit (her death was a "martyrdom" in that sense). Later, it is claimed that the widower's feelings have remained constant through the various changes of life just as the snow on the mountain-side has 'defied' the sun's efforts to melt it.

### Structural charting

We could now attempt a simple flow-chart of the poem, using arrows to demonstrate in-

ter-relationships and conflicts which either follow or cut across the logical development of the poem.



This is by no means definitive. In the first place, it takes into account only the words and phrases which mark out the poem's frame of meaning most clearly, and neglects phonetic, syntactical and rhythmic arrangements.<sup>25</sup> And even on this level, various other "modes of order" could be demonstrated. For instance, it would be possible to relate the night-lamp and the cross of snow, in that they are both the actually perceived, objective bases of subsequent trains of thought; and the two paradoxes, the fire which destroys yet at the same time purifies, and the cross which suggests at once suffering and spiritual ascendancy, could be seen to counterbalance each other. Also, time plays an important role in the poem: it opens with a "long" night and closes with reference to a considerably longer stretch of time which appears, however, to have been telescoped by Longfellow's steadfastness. Only one ambiguity appears, when the "changing scenes and seasons" which Longfellow's feelings have withstood are shown to run parallel to the *sun* which the mountain has defied, in the comparison in the second part of the poem. The sun, of course, is traditionally seen as a source of life and energy. Does the comparison simply peter out at this point, or can Longfellow's loyalty to his wife's memory be viewed as a rejection of the natural, restorative operations of nature? At first sight, this does not appear to be at all the kind of ambiguity that William Empson has brought to our notice, "which gives fluidity of thought and several superimposed rhythms" to the poem; yet it may, like his fourth type of ambiguity, reveal a "complicated state of mind in the author."<sup>26</sup>

Some critics would dismiss this kind of charting, and the isolating of any factor which does not quite 'fit in,' as "pure 'playfulness.'"<sup>27</sup> But it does disclose unities—and disunities—which transcend conservative notions of form, and possible significances which the poet himself may not have been aware of. The ideas which we derive from (or 'import' into) these are likely to be different from those which earlier readers inferred. Does this poem, for example, contain or give rise to the idea that prolonged mourning is unnatural? It could be argued that such an idea is at least "consequent on conventional meaning,"<sup>28</sup> which is concerned with the *supernatural*, although it does not go well with the elevated tone of the ending, and we may therefore decide not to give much weight to it.

#### Sources and resources

There is still one more aspect of "The Cross of Snow" to be considered. (No wonder T. S. Eliot, in an apparent reference to John Wain's book, described modern criticism in terms of lemon-squeezing.<sup>29</sup>) That is the way its key words relate to the ultimate sources of Longfel-

low's imagination. With its network of allusions to ritual death or sacrifice (the woman's "martyrdom" and the man's "cross"), purification (the "fire" through which the woman passes, and her "white" soul) and resurrection (the woman's face with its "halo," and the man's "cross" again), the poem would seem to be a gift to the 'decodifier.' It is evident that the Christian allusions function, as Structuralist critics believe that the secular myth and indeed language itself function, "as a schematic ordering of otherwise unintelligible experience."<sup>30</sup> What is more, they enable Longfellow to assume 'membership' with his wife (through his identification of his own suffering with that of Jesus) in the company of the blessed. And we can perhaps deepen our response to the poem by understanding and being able to articulate the process by which this was achieved.

Another way of showing how Longfellow tried to cope with and overcome his grief would be to use another set of terms, this time drawn from psychology, such as 'projection' and 'transference.' It is hard to relate the language of the poem to any one particular stage of childhood development (which is how Holland tells us to proceed), but the early lines, with their suggestion of waking dream or fantasy, do seem to open the way for some psychological speculation. We might go on to say that in the later lines, Longfellow's grief is 'projected' on to the picture of inanimate nature which he sees, and subconsciously 'transferred' to Jesus through this medium. The use of these defensive ploys would suggest that the poet did indeed sense, deep down, that such grief can be ultimately damaging.

Christians may find these two approaches to Longfellow's Christian allusions—as myth, and as a psychological crutch—distasteful, but many modern thinkers would find them acceptable, useful and also compatible. Longfellow was using the means at his disposal to come to terms with his disturbing feelings, and we are using the means at our disposal to see how he did so in this poem. And the "main ideal of criticism," according to Burke, "is to use all there is to use."<sup>31</sup>

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It may be argued that however deeply we probed into "The Cross of Snow," nothing very earth-shattering emerged. But then, it was never a very challenging poem in the first place—compare Longfellow's Christian allusions with those of Eliot, even in a rather short poem like "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," which can hardly be understood at all at first reading; or the possibilities for psychoanalysis in this sonnet with those which absolutely demand our attention in Sylvia Plath's poetry. After all, it is hardly surprising that the new points which could be found in "The Cross of Snow" were so straightforward as to preclude much discussion, although they might have been pursued outside the text—into a biographical enquiry, for instance. (One of the interesting developments in Longfellow criticism has, in fact, been the correction of the traditional view of him as a serene, sage-like figure: Lawrance Thompson's *Young Longfellow (1807-1843)*, first published in 1938, started the new trend by emphasizing the conflicts Longfellow experienced in his early life.<sup>32</sup>)

Clearly, certain poems respond more to this kind of exhaustive analysis than others. It is no accident that the same poets' works tend to provide the battlegrounds for the opposing camps of modern critics—the metaphysicals, for example, or Blake's or Coleridge's—nor that this kind of criticism has grown up in an age when the degree of difficulty presented by a



poem has become a criterion of its worth. Randall Jarrell, in his article on "The Obscurity of the Poet," has described the attitude of the modernist poet towards his public in these terms: "the poet said, 'Since you won't read me, I'll make sure you can't.'" <sup>33</sup> It was inevitable that a more complicated critical apparatus would be developed to deal with the work of such poets, and equally inevitable that once the apparatus was in use, it would be applied to earlier poetry, and have some effect on our judgement of it.

Longfellow's literary reputation has, on the whole, suffered from the trends of modern criticism. Few of his poems stand up well to such batteries of investigations as the foregoing: with their confused imagery and illogicalities, and their general thinness of texture, they are apt to collapse under such pressure. Of the students in I. A. Richards's experiment recorded in *Practical Criticism* (1929), 92 percent responded unfavourably to the Longfellow poem they were asked to examine. Objections were brought against both "the logic and clarity of the poem," and the superficiality of the sentiments expressed in it—"sheer gush," wrote one student—to the extent that I. A. Richards himself felt the need to defend it. <sup>34</sup> It becomes a matter of curiosity that Longfellow's poems are so familiar to readers on both sides of the Atlantic, and that many of his lines have become a part of our language. Here is an excellent example of two modern phenomena: the sharp divide that now exists between the scholarly critic and the ordinary reading public; and the way in which current critical thought is affecting the academic assessment of individual poets, and consequently of the whole of our literary tradition. As far as Longfellow himself is concerned, there is much to be said for the more rigorous expectations of the present-day critic, for he was surely not the major poet he was once thought to be, any more than he was a sort of *guru* among the Cambridge Brahmins. But it would be a pity if his best works (including sonnets like "The Cross of Snow") were to be neglected.

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#### **D. H. Lawrence's "Bavarian Gentians"**

D. H. Lawrence is generally seen as a modernist poet. Certainly, he believed that the old traditional forms of verse, imposed from without, were artificial. To him, they were nothing but a 'dead shell.' The poet's subject, he felt, should somehow produce its own form. Thus he turned from the more traditional line and stanza arrangements of his early poems towards verse in which techniques like paradox, balance and repetition did not simply complement but actually took the place of regular versification. These sort of techniques, he hoped, could shape and unify his material without falsifying his experience in any way. "It is the hidden *emotional* pattern that makes poetry," he said, "not the obvious form." <sup>35</sup> These views, with their rejection of any distinction between form and content, mark him out as a believer in poetry as a living organism which evolves in a largely unconscious (though deeply felt) process, rather than as a conscious bringing together of various artistic constituents. This organic view of art has been with us right from classical times, but was developed in England by Coleridge, and in our own age has been used by critics to justify their emphasis on the uniqueness and inalienable unity of the individual poem. It would be natural, then, for a poem by Lawrence, which is comparatively impervious to traditional methods of criticism, to reveal more of its secrets to the modern style of analysis, with its emphasis on the energies exerted

by words in relationship or conflict with each other, and its expectation of various patterns and levels of significance.

Therefore I have chosen to consider next what is often described as Lawrence's best poem, "Bavarian Gentians."

#### BAVARIAN GENTIAN

Not every man has gentians in his house  
in soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark  
darkening the day-time, torch-like with the smoking blueness of Pluto's  
gloom,

- 5   ribbed and torch-like, with their blaze of darkness spread blue  
down flattening into points, flattened under the sweep of white day  
torch-flower of the blue-smoking darkness, Pluto's dark-blue daze,  
black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue,  
giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's pale lamps give off light,  
10   lead me then, lead the way.

Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!

let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of this flower  
down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness  
even where Persephone goes, just now, from the frosted September

- 15   to the sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark  
and Persephone herself is but a voice  
or a darkness invisible enfolded in the deeper dark  
of the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion of dense gloom,  
among the splendour of torches of darkness, shedding darkness on the lost  
bride and her groom.

This poem, like "The Cross of Snow," is concerned with death. Like Longfellow, Lawrence too starts off with the perception of physical objects which suggest and illuminate something beyond the physical reality, and lead to the exploration of an emotional and spiritual state. But at every point there are remarkable differences. The mystery of death, which Longfellow sees quite conventionally as the "repose" of his wife's soul, Lawrence tries to face, penetrate and find ways of evoking. The physical objects, in other words, the beautiful deep blue Alpine flowers, become an integral part of the poetic experience, even a focus for it, for they are seen not only as a guide, a "torch" which will illuminate the subsequent exploration, but also an embodiment of some of the qualities of the state of death—or rather, of the process of dying—itself. And the pious Christian references in Longfellow's poem are replaced by a complex of feeling and ideas about death which find powerful expression in Lawrence's treatment of the seasonal myth of Pluto and Persephone.

### Close analysis

When we look closely at poem, the negative of the opening line soon turns out to have an undertow of irony. "Not every man has gentians in his house," it is true, but every man must come to that "dark" which is already "darkening the day-time" for the poet. The sibilants and gently lapsing rhythm of 1.2, in which very specific references to Autumn (Michaelmas is September 29th, which introduces the last quarter of the year) are accompanied by the adjectives "soft," "slow" and "sad," make us profoundly receptive to the implications of death which follow. These implications are embodied, at first, in the smoky involution of the deep bells of the flowers themselves. But already, in 1.4, there is an allusion to Pluto, the Greek god of the underworld, which begins to give a mythical dimension to the darkness of the flowers and the hints of death which emanate from them. The words "dark" and "darkness" are repeated many times in the long, heavy lines until they seem in fact to define something palpable, quite as definite and reactive to "the sweep of white day" as the flowers whose shape ("big ... torch-like ... flattening into points"), texture ("ribbed") and colour ("burning dark blue") are described. Further references to the underworld of classical mythology ("Pluto's dark-blue daze," "the halls of Dis") increase this sense of palpability, so that the idea of the darkness as a place to be explored is established by 1.10 ("lead me then, lead the way").

As the darkness becomes more palpable, with an existence to some extent distinguishable from the flowers themselves, so the gentians, despite all the precise detail with which they are depicted, become more mysterious. It is an inversion of our normal expectations which corresponds with the poet's withdrawal from everyday reality, and increased responsiveness to the experience of dying. But to say that Lawrence is withdrawing from everyday reality (as he very clearly is, in 1.13— "down the darker and darker stairs") is not to say that he is withdrawing from life as such. For as he approaches the realms of darkness, he appeals to a gentian to "lead" him (1.10) and to be a "torch" for him (1.11). And the mythological structure of the darkness not only contains its own rich light (1.8) but is also associated with the promise of life itself: the light there is compared to the light shed by the "pale lamps" of Demeter, the goddess of grain and agriculture, the Earth-mother. By this association we are prepared for the view of death in the last section as a fecund interval between "frosted September" and the Spring into which Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter and queen of Pluto/Dis, perennially re-emerges.

This great paradox, that death contains the promise of life, just as life contains the promise of death, is embodied in three ways in the poem. First and foremost, it is embodied in the partial identity of the vividly glowing Bavarian gentians with the darkness of death. Even in the last section, there is a sense in which the flower the poet asks for is not simply a guide but the very vortex which he prepares to enter into, "where blue is darkened on blueness." Here is an example of the deeply suggestive ambiguity which Empson has taught us to appreciate. Secondly, it is embodied in another, related paradox—that the darkness of both the flowers and the state of death, however profound it may *seem* (1.15), is nevertheless a source of light. The opposing words "darkness" and "torch," "lamps" and so on are often repeated separately of course, but are also brought together in tense juxtaposition in phrases

like “blaze of darkness” (1.5) and “torches of darkness” (1.19). And there are other occasions when verbs associated with light (“giving off,” “shedding”) are used of the darkness. Finally, there is the use of the Persephone myth which gives the authority of ancient belief and the corroboration of the endless seasonal cycle which it represents, to Lawrence’s idea.

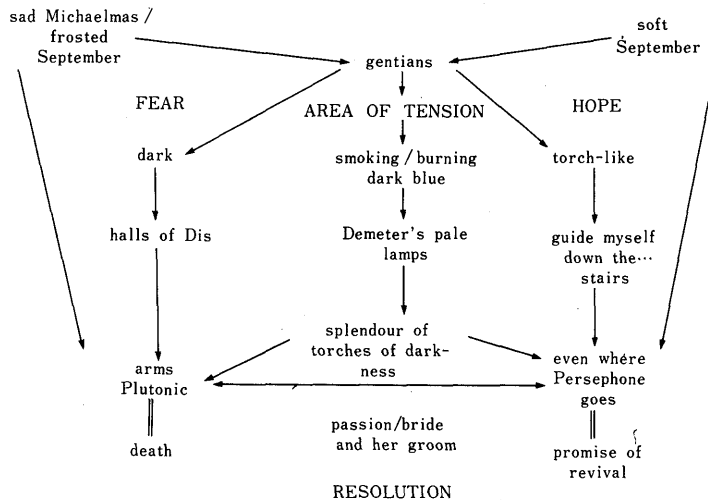
The last lines give us the picture, only visible to the eye of the imagination (for “Persephone herself is but a voice/or a darkness invisible”), of the union of the forces of life (Persephone) with those of death (Pluto) which is both passionate and, we are bound to feel, richly productive.

At the end, we might like to look back at the opening lines again. We noted some irony in the reference to “every man.” But now we may appreciate another possibility of tone here—that of gratitude for having been granted a special opportunity. Lawrence was truly privileged to have the gentians in his house, to guide him and involve him in the discoveries of this poem.

Background knowledge can add only a little to this close analysis. To know that Lawrence the man was acutely sensitive to life and yet, at the age of 43 when the first drafts of this poem were written, was desperately ill with the tuberculosis which would soon kill him, must make us feel some extra poignancy in reading the poem. (A large bunch of gentians had been placed in his sick-room by his wife, Frieda.<sup>36</sup>) And we do need the very elementary knowledge of classical mythology which the poem presupposes. However, a grasp of the rules of prosody will do nothing for us, for the poem has no traditional form and its long, variably extended lines resist being scanned. Repetition, ambiguity, balance, as well as paradox, have indeed been the means of achieving a profound and moving unity. This is a poem in which it seems genuinely impossible to separate the ‘shape’ of what is being said from the ‘saying’ itself, and perhaps it is the modern reader, who is trained in close analysis of the text, who can best hope to identify and articulate the poetic processes involved.

### **Structural charting**

This much having been acknowledged, we still need to question the value of the more ‘scientific’ investigative tools of modern criticism. To tabulate or chart *all* the various inter-relationships in a poem like “Bavarian Gentians” would appear to be a self-defeating project—the network of associations would be so dense as to confuse rather than clarify. As Burke has admitted, in such a case, “The lines would merge into a blot.”<sup>37</sup> The more complex and tightly interwoven the work in hand, then, the harder the task of ‘anatomizing’ it. As I have already mentioned, Forrest-Thomson had to make several different ‘anatomies’ of a Shakespeare sonnet. And it is interesting that Burke himself, for all his talk of ‘equations,’ ‘strategies’ and so on, avoids making actual charts on the page, although he says at one point, when writing about Coleridge’s symbolism, that the difficult task of “charting [is] worth trying.”<sup>38</sup> Here is my attempt, not to look for inter-relationships which lead us outside the text, but simply to map out the main developments and associations within “Bavarian Gentians” itself.



Even here, a great deal has had to be omitted. For instance, I have not tried to show all the play on the words 'darkness' and 'blue,' or all the oppositions between light and dark (a favourite with the Structuralists). So again, it is by no means definitive. It seems to me, however, that it does bring out clearly the balance between Lawrence's hope and fear, the area of tension between them, and finally their resolution in the image of Persephone in the arms of Pluto, and therefore I have written in those words (FEAR, HOPE, AREA OF TENSION and RESOLUTION) where appropriate.

Obviously, such an approach cannot replace fully reasoned critical analysis. It is only an abstraction from the poem—something which Lawrence himself would have violently disliked:

If we try to fix the living tissue, as the biologists fix it with formation, we have only a hardened bit of the past.... Give me nothing fixed, set, static... There must be the rapid momentaneous association of things which meet and pass on the for ever incalculable journey of creation: everything left in its own rapid, fluid relationship with the rest of things.<sup>39</sup>

Yet structural 'fixing' may confirm, give force to and even add a new dimension to analysis, especially if our intention is not so much to make the poem fall apart, as to show how it evolves and where it comes to rest. And this poem, I believe, does come to rest somewhere: in the final image of the passionate interpenetration of life and death, which brings harmony at last to the poet's duality of vision.

### Sources and resources

Is it possible to elicit from the poem any more than close analysis or such a charting has already revealed? Can any 'code' be recovered from the poem to yield various ideas? Graham Hough has compared "Bavarian Gentians" to another of the *Last Poems*, "The Ship of Death," saying that "Both are a sort of incantation, almost an initiation ritual,"<sup>40</sup> and we might be more precise and say that it is the word "dark" and its derivatives which are repeated like a mantra eighteen times, and that 1.11 ("lead me then, lead the way") starts the ritual of initiation down into the depths of the darkness. This conveys more than the state-

ment of another critic, Tom Marshall, who simply notes approvingly that there are “just the right number of repetitions of ‘darkness’”<sup>41</sup> in the poem. To be aware that the poem works as an invocation of a mystic state is to open the way to a new view of it, as being about a spiritual experience in *this* world rather than about the confrontation with death. The case for such a reading of “The Ship of Death” and other *Last Poems* has in fact been put already by a Japanese critic, Takeo Iida, who uses parallels with early Catholic writings to argue that these poems stand in “the tradition of Christian mysticism.”<sup>42</sup> That the earliest version of “Bavarian Gentians” was actually entitled “The State of Grace” gives additional support to this point of view.

Another possible source of meaning, which the many inter-relations and oppositions in the poem seem to indicate, is a psychological one. For here is that “risking of the body”<sup>43</sup> which Holland associates with phallic writing, and it is plain that the “ribbed,” funnel-shaped flowers which flatten out into the day, and yet are big and torch-like, have associations with both female and male sexuality. The duality of Lawrence’s vision which is resolved in a passionate consummation/interpenetration...it has been impossible even to discuss the poem without the sexual connotations creeping in, and it may be that this is where its deepest appeal lies. Some critics believe that subconsciously, before the effort of understanding the poem has been made, we are absorbed in and gratified by the psychological fantasy which was the poet’s own subconscious inspiration, and which is still there at the heart of the poem despite the process of artistic transformation.<sup>44</sup> There was little evidence of this in the case of Longfellow (who is indeed often accused of being too ‘bookish’); but in the case of Lawrence, who himself was insistent on the need to be open to the primal instinctive urges, it is easy to feel the strong pull of his yearning for completion, even as he faces the ultimate experience of death, or spiritual oblivion.

A poem about death—a poem with its roots in Christian mysticism—a poem with sexual implications. Are these apparently widely divergent readings to be accepted as variants, or can we possibly reconcile them? Perhaps we can. Following up the psychologists’ theory about artistic creation as a ‘transformation,’ we can see the mythical content of “Bavarian Gentians” as an entirely appropriate means of ‘transforming’ the poet’s physical yearning into a spiritual one. Recourse to Frye’s *Anatomy* reminds us that the myth Lawrence chose has its origins deep in nature:

The vegetable world supplies us...with the annual cycle of the seasons, often identified with or represented by a divine figure which dies in the autumn...disappears in winter, and revives in spring.<sup>45</sup>

Persephone is, in fact, cited as the female “divine figure.” And that Lawrence used this myth quite consciously for the purpose of ‘transformation’ is confirmed by his manuscripts. In “The State of Grace” he used conventional religious terms like ‘baptism’—but, it seemed, unwillingly, in a tone of irony. As a man whose religious sensibility could never be expressed in an orthodox way, he was evidently not happy with such words. Then a new draft entitled “Glory of Darkness” shows him excitedly discovering the aptness of the Persephone myth, with its links with both the natural world and the “realm” of the spirit:

Oh, I know—  
Persephone has just gone back  
down the thickening thickening gloom  
of dark-blue gentians to Pluto...<sup>46</sup>

The descent of Persephone could be taken as symbolic either of the physical process of dying or of a mystic withdrawal into an inner "darkness": what is important is that the descent is temporary, productive, and leads to a renewal. After his first reference to it, the poet was able to go on to embody much more of his inspiration in the myth, until he could contemplate through it a fulfilment of needs which existed on physical and also spiritual levels.

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Once again, I have tried several approaches to the one text, and I hope I have shown that all of them have in fact yielded some new insight/s. The possibility of expanding some, if not all, of these short studies into separate, fully worked out critical articles or discussions in critical books can be glimpsed, and in some cases has already been tried. My references to various Lawrence critics bear witness to this. Then, isn't it very unfair of conservative scholars like Gardner and Lerner to disparage recent critical developments? Not entirely. In the first place, bringing all these approaches together makes us aware of areas of overlap. That the poems we have looked at here are fundamentally concerned with, respectively, Longfellow's grief after the death of his wife, and Lawrence's 'immortal longings,' is after all not in question, so the use of rather technical methods of exploring the poems more minutely, whatever interesting discoveries are made en route, is bound to bring us back to the same basic 'naturalisation' (just as Forrest-Thomson and Empson both reached a similar reading of a Shakespeare sonnet, but by different roads). Does this not illustrate what Cedric Watts has called "the jargonish fallacy"<sup>47</sup>? Readers who expect critical works to simplify rather than elaborate on the text may well object that it does. The 'anatomizing' of poems in particular presents a degree of difficulty which may not, in the end, seem to be out-weighed by the rewards it offers. Moreover, it is obvious that some texts are better approached by one method than another. For instance, it was not very useful to adopt a psychological approach to "The Cross of Snow," whereas it was to "Bavarian Gentians." Thus, restraint, concern for the reader and selectivity are all needed in order to make the best use of, and pass on to others effectively, our new ways of looking at poems. Unfortunately, these qualities have not been the hallmarks of many recent critics.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, it must be said that there is a more fundamental drawback to current critical thought, which this paper has illustrated all too well. Take "Bavarian Gentians," for instance. To my mind, this poem is not just a clever use of paradox, the final significance of which can be left to the individual reader to decide; nor is it best seen as a brilliant use of myth to turn inner needs into a work of art. It is even more than the sum of its parts. Although I admit that I cannot *prove* authorial intention, and may certainly mistake it in minor particulars, in the end I am willing to be guided by intuition, instinct, empathy, common sense—those qualities that characterize all attempts at human communication—and accept that the predominant concern of this moving poem, published posthumously, is with dying. Its greatness lies in its powerful expression of Lawrence's encouragement to himself and to us, not to abandon life in

the face of death, nor yet to enter death unwillingly; in Lawrence's heartfelt belief that we should go forward bravely, in the assurance that the eternal processes of nature will fulfil themselves in terms of human life, too. The poem is Lawrence's proof and declaration that the soul is capable of "remaining true to herself in her going."<sup>49</sup> Modern scholars with their emphasis on the semantic and mechanical evolution of the text, and their own entries into it, are just not attuned to the moral voice of the poet, to literature as communication and as a force which can help us live our lives with "a sense of increased capacity."<sup>50</sup> It is for this reason, I believe, that the Lawrence poem in I. A. Richards's collection was next in unpopularity to the poem by Longfellow: even in an age of critics who might be expected to appreciate the skill of his best work, Lawrence, with his passionate belief in the arts as a flow of imaginative life which offers a "soul-satisfying experience,"<sup>51</sup> has yet to be sufficiently recognized as a poet.

To sum up then. Modern critics have much to offer in the way they can "startle a dull reader into alertness,"<sup>52</sup> and bring out the finer points of poems, especially in the case of allusive, complex poetry such as that of our own century. They may give scope for new ideas about the text, and sometimes even produce variant readings of it. But there is need for discretion in the application of their approaches. A more significant reservation is that these critics, in their concern with abstractions and technicalities, fail to perform what is perhaps the most vital function of the critic—to help the reader to appreciate the "life-communicating"<sup>53</sup> quality of the work of art. (The word is T. E. Hulme's; the italics are mine.)

#### NOTES

1. Helen Gardner, "Present Discontents," *In Defense of the Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 25.
2. "Is this book then intended as a counter-attack? The answer, I'm afraid, must be Yes and No," Laurence Lerner, *Reconstructing Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 3.
3. Lerner 9.
4. Gardner 6. (The essay itself appears in Warren's *Selected Essays* [New York: Random, 1958].)
5. Lerner 12.
6. Hazard Adams, "Contemporary Ideas of Literature: Terrible Beauty or Rough Beast," *Directions for Criticism: Structuralism and its Alternatives*, ed. Murray Krieger and L. S. Dembo (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1977) 71.
7. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1978) 2.
8. Norman Holland, "The Unconscious of Literature: The Psychoanalytical Approach," *Contemporary Criticism*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 12, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Arnold, 1970) 131-153.
9. Wayne Booth, "Rhetorical Critics Old and New," *Reconstructing Literature* 141.
10. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 323.
11. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, ed. *Understanding Poetry*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, 1976) 1.
12. E. D. Hirsch, "Poetry and its 'Meaning'" (reprinted from *Validity in Interpretation*, 1967), *Twentieth Century Poetry: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Graham Martin and P. N. Furbank (Milton Keynes: Open U, 1975) 91.



13. Stanley Fish, preface, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, paperback ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971) n. pag.
14. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 124.
15. Alex Preminger, ed. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 984.
16. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, paperback ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 134.
17. W. B. Yeats, note on "An Image from a Past Life," quoted by A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1968) 222.
18. T. S. Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," reprinted in *American Poetic Theory*, ed. George Perkins (New York: Holt, 1972) 244.
20. Quoted by Lentricchia 125.
21. Frye 10. Sir James Frazer's exploration of universal myths, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), was an important source of inspiration for Eliot's *The Waste Land*; Ernst Cassirer, the German philosopher, explored the symbolic functions of thought in his mammoth *The Philosophy of Literary Forms* (1923-9).
22. John Wain, *Interpretations*, paperback ed. (London: Routledge, 1961) xii-iii.
23. Burke 89.
24. Gerald Graff, preface, *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) n. pag.
25. These, however, are the very arrangements that some critics feel we should concentrate on—e. g. see Forrest-Thomson, preface xi.
26. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Hogarth, 1984) 75, 133.
27. Gardner 2.
28. Roger Scruton, "Public Text and Common Reader," *Reconstructing Poetry* 51.
29. See Gardner 11.
30. Roger Fowler, ed. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge, 1973) 121.
31. Burke 23.
32. Richard Dilworth Rust, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow," *15 American Authors Before 1900: Bibliographic Essays on Research and Criticism*, ed. Robert A. Rees and Earl N. Harbert (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1971) 269.
33. Randall Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," *American Poetic Theory* 311.
34. I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (New York: Harcourt, 1929) 163, 164, 170.
35. D. H. Lawrence, Letter to Edward Marsh, 19 Nov. 1913, *D. H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Heinemann, 1967) 80.
36. Keith Sagar, *D. H. Lawrence: A Calendar of his Works* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1979) 187.
37. Burke 21.
38. Burke 21.
39. Lawrence, "Introduction to *New Poems*," *Selected Literary Criticism* 85-6.
40. Graham Hough, *The Dark Sun: A Study of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Duckworth, 1970) 214.
41. Tom Marshall, *The Psychic Mariner: A Reading of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1970) 205.
42. Takeo Iida, "D. H. Lawrence's 'The Ship of Death' and Other Poems in *Last Poems*," *Studies in English Literature* 58.1 (1981): 47.

43. Holland 136.
44. Holland 151-2.
45. Frye 160.
46. [Pencil version:], *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinta and Warren Roberts, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1972) 2: 974. See also, for a discussion of the textual evolution of this poem, Gail Porter Mandell, *The Phoenix Paradox: A Study of Renewal Through Change in the Collected Poems and Last Poems of D. H. Lawrence* (Carbondale: S. Illinois UP, 1984) 140 onwards.
47. "This occurs when a critic claims or implies that to use a very difficult or obscure mode of expression is to demonstrate one's integrity," Cedric Watts, "Bottom's Children," *Reconstructing Poetry* 31. Cf. Lawrence himself: "all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon," "John Galsworthy," *Selected Literary Criticism* 118.
48. To illustrate the opaqueness of much modern critical theorizing, here is Lentricchia *explaining* Derrida: "This will mean, in effect, that the possible only presently impossible never was possible as ontological ground" 171.
49. Lawrence, "Whitman," *Selected Literary Criticism* 402.
50. T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (New York: Harcourt, 1924) 168.
51. Lawrence, "Puritanism and the Arts," *Selected Literary Criticism* 59.
52. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," reprinted in *Modern Poetics*, ed. James Scully (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965) 32.
53. Hulme 169.

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